

## THE WEALTH OF A WALK.

BY MAUDE ROBINSON.

A BIFAK morning at the end of March, on a range of low rolling downs six miles from everywhere, with pale sunshine struggling rather unsuccessfully to mitigate the effect of the keen, parching east wind. It is not by any means an ideal day to start on a long country walk with no companion, yet I hope to prove that even under such untoward circumstances, pleasure, real and lasting, may be found by the wayside.

My way lies first along the edge of a large "laying," as the open, unfenced fields are called in Sussex. The winter oats, sown the previous autumn, are struggling feebly for existence among the harsh, dry clods. A few enterprising weeds look happier than the corn. Here is the red dead nettle (*Lamium purpureum*), so common and so troublesome in our gardens, that few have noted the beautiful crimson velvet of its blossoms.

Three kinds of the little blue speedwell grow side by side. Two of them, the ivy-leaved (*Veronica hederæfolia*) and the procumbent (*Veronica agrestis*), are believed to be truly indigenous, but the larger plant of the three, Buxbaum's speedwell (*Veronica buxbaumi*), is a foreigner introduced within living memory. It is believed to have come from the sunny south with the seed of Italian rye grass, and so well does our island climate suit it that it has spread all over England, and may be found in almost any cornfield or garden blooming in the early spring, or even in the winter if the weather is not very severe. It may be known by the pale blue flower about the size of a pea, and striped with white, which has a provoking habit of dropping off directly you gather the plant.

A short piece of ancient blackthorn hedge, overgrown with honeysuckle and wild clematis, runs along the western side of the oat field. Under this hedge five or six years ago, there were to be found a profusion of sweet-scented purple violets. This season not one is blooming there. A curiously capricious

plant is the wild sweet violet, it seems to exhaust the soil, having extracted from it all the nutriment which is necessary for a violet's well-being, and then dies out, and will suddenly appear in some quite fresh locality. But if there are no violets, my search under the hedge is rewarded, for there is a cowslip in full bloom a whole month before the date when we expect to find these sweetest of meadow flowers, the delight of the little people, who make golden balls, and drink tea brewed from the fragrant blossoms. Flowers do make mistakes in the calendar sometimes. I have found marsh marigolds in October, and solitary dog violets in the autumn woods, when all their brethren have long ago accomplished their part in life, and dropped their seeds into the brown soil.

Now I have left the hedge, and am mounting the hillside clothed with primeval turf, cropped to a lawn-like fineness by close-nibbling flocks of sheep.

The herbage is sweet and wholesome, but no great bulk can be expected, for on the top of a chalk pit on my left one can see that only two or three inches of soil clothe the solid chalk rock, so that plants which depend on striking their roots to any depth cannot exist here.

An interesting place is that chalk pit, long since deserted by lime burners. It was a favourite playground when we were children in the summer time, but strictly forbidden in the winter, when after a frost the great blocks of chalk would fall, leaving fresh white scars on the weather-beaten face of the cliff, and exposing new ledges and crevices for the birds at the next nesting season.

In July the sides of this pit will be blue with the stately spikes of the viper's bugloss (*Echium vulgare*), one of our most showy and beautiful of wild flowers, and the turf below a gorgeous carpet of purple thyme and golden birds' foot trefoil. I always peep over that cliff as I pass, for I have looked down on a fox, curled up asleep, among the blocks of chalk, quite unaware of the human presence. In nesting time, too, there are always birds, starlings, noisy jackdaws, and swift-winged kestrels. But to-day the cliff is only tenanted by a couple of pairs of stock-doves, who bustle off with the peculiar clatter made by the wings of the pigeon tribe when flying rapidly. These birds are believed to get their name from building in